

## A Letter on New Birth and Eternal Life

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Having been asked to jot down a few considerations as to the difference between New Birth and Eternal Life, may I say that it is of the utmost importance that we should all be saved from looking to man. In the things of God, neither can we accept untruth that a good man says because it is he that says it, nor can we reject a true thing because we think he is a bad man that says it. A good man like Job has to confess in self-judgment that he had spoken things that he understood not, and a bad man like Balaam was forced to say true things in spite of himself, by the power of God.

You to whom I am writing are not of those who believe that there is any good in the natural man as born of Adam fallen, either in his heart or his brain or his hand, that can commend him to God. From the moment that he was fallen Adam was incapable of producing by natural generation an unfallen being. In Adam, *all die*. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?

So that from the outset, any soul really accepted of God was the work of God and not the work of man. And in this connection we are forced to own that — the natural birth not qualifying a man to receive the things of God — the new birth has always been *a necessity*.

But while man in the flesh was under probation the time had not come to *state* this. You will find several things which have always been true, not presented as doctrine in the Old Testament. Take, for example, the natural relationship of *marriage* and the inviolability of the marriage tie. "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives." Christ adds, "I say unto you," etc. (Matt. 19). Take the question of *how a man is to be justified* and accounted righteous (Rom. 4). While man — Israel — was under probation, he was told to keep the law, observe the rite of circumcision, etc. But Abraham and David were reckoned righteous by *faith without works*. Take *faith* as the principle by which saints have always walked (Heb. 11). Hebrews were always brought up surrounded by promises which related to the earth, and things that were seen; yet *faith* was the principle according to which they lived.

And so as to new birth. It would have nullified man's testing in the flesh to be told from the outset, "Ye must be born again." And I may add that even when — in the first three Gospels — Christ is presented in the light of the great Test for man, new birth is not spoken of. But in John's Gospel, where from the outset Christ's rejection is assumed (John 1: 10, 11), you find at once the statement that those who received Him had to be born of God to do so. Hence it is brought in with tremendous emphasis in the case of Nicodemus, who, although born of Adam, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on the natural line as a Jew, was told, "Marvel not that I say unto thee, *ye* [emphatic] must be born again." There is no seeing nor entering into the kingdom of God without it. And what was said to the ye of verse 7, is stated universally of *man* in verses 3 and 5.

So that there has always been the new birth, although the doctrine of it is unfolded only in the New Testament. Afterwards Peter, James, and John all speak of it, each in his own line; and all these, men of whom Paul said, they seemed to be pillars. Paul himself does not exactly formulate the doctrine, though he teaches in searching detail that in me — that is, in my flesh — good does not dwell, and that the carnal mind is enmity against God, and is neither subject to the law of God, nor can be, so that those in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 7 and 8). In his teaching he brings in the Spirit, and life in

the Spirit, for liberty, relationship, and support while we are on earth.

Further, we may say surely that God has always had eternal life in view, as Psalm 133 and Daniel 12 clearly show, for Israel and millennial blessing; and as Romans 6 and Titus 1 show in a general way. The latter passage has importance as showing that eternal life is connected with the purpose of God; but that as to the preaching of it, this was only manifested later, in apostolic ministry.

To sum up thus far, we can see then that new birth has always been a necessity, and that in producing by His own sovereign power the new birth, God has always had eternal life in view for those who are subjects of the new birth. And hence we are safe in saying that in the fulness of times, *all* who have been the subjects of God's purpose will possess eternal life, whatever the form may be that God has determined for each family in blessing. This I may refer to in a moment.

Let us now distinguish between new birth and that which, to our poor human judgment, may sometimes *appear* to be new birth. As to new birth, the *nature* which goes along with the *being* is determined by its moral parentage. God is the Author of it, and the Word and the Spirit the Seed and the Agency used (John 1: 13; John 3: 6; 1 Peter 1: 23). It is therefore spiritual, morally of God, and so Divine and incorruptible. It is instinct with the love of holiness, with the fear of God, the hatred of sin for its own sake, and it clings to God. One is not here speaking of these things being intelligently grasped or understood by a new-born soul, but of the nature in itself. Further, wherever it is found it is imperishable, and incorruptible. It may be obscured or hindered in a man by bad teaching, and want of the Gospel; and there may be great delays in his entrance upon the blessing which God wishes and purposes that he shall fully enjoy, owing to his frequent allowance of the carnal Adam nature which God has judicially set aside for him in the death of Christ; but if born again at all he is sure of being in his place in God's counsel as though every thing were already fulfilled (Rom. 11: 29).

But we speak above of one truly born again. God is God, and we are men. God never makes mistakes; we often, too often, do. "The Lord knoweth them that are His" — this is Scripture. We sometimes *think* that people are His — but our thinking is *not* Scripture. I may see tears, I may hear groans and cries, I may even see a fairly long-continued profession of acceptance of Christ, and *think* that a man is born again. But my thoughts are — let me repeat — not Scripture. The Word of God itself teaches me that good seed may drop into stony ground, and gives as its own explanation that some may hear the Word and anon with joy receive it. We may be deceived into counting these promising "cases of blessing," only to discover with bitterness the "afterward" of Mark 4: 16-17, and that they had no root in themselves. A sailor in a storm, a soldier on a battlefield, a civilian in sudden peril, may all cry and appear in earnest; and one may add, an impressionable nature in a "revival," or under the influence of a touching or thrilling song, may appear to us to be converted to God, yet be a mere flash in the pan. The reality of new birth is proved by its continuance (Heb. 3, 6, 10; Col. 1: 23; Jude 4, 12, 13). We may be deceived by appearances; God never is. New birth is God's own work, and will eventuate in the accomplishment of God's purpose.

Now, when an ordinary human child is born, the nature is in any and every case the same, i.e., it is the Adam nature. As to its environment or development, you may have Jew, Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free — these form the environment into which the nature grows. Also you may have the sailor life, the soldier life, the civilian life; you may have city life, and country life, and so on — all as the event may work out. We can see then even in everyday happenings that while the birth is everywhere the same, and we can say of every person born in the ordinary way, He is alive; yet we can rightly speak of different spheres of life into which the birth is the introduction. It is in this sense that we can rightly speak of distinguishing between new birth and eternal life. That every new-born soul has

life goes without saying. But that every new-born soul has life in exactly the same sense of the word, and with identical features of life, is not true; for eternal life for Old Testament saints, or for Israel in the millennium, is widely different from eternal life for the Christian. The latter is a saint united to a *rejected* and heavenly Christ in this present dispensation. Israel in the millennium (and even such Gentiles as will be blessed through Israel) will be associated with Christ *accepted* here, Christ identified with earth though manifested from heaven. Hence *our* blessings are heavenly, *theirs* are to be earthly. *Our* conversation is in heaven, and our life is hid with Christ in God; *Christ in heaven* is our life. Their centre will be on earth, even *the Lord in connection with Zion*, for *there* the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. Our life as Christians will develop along the lines of sonship with the Father and heavenly associations; their life will be connected with earthly associations with the Messiahship of the Son of God. We have access within the veil in the company of our great High Priest; they will be blessed outside when the Priest comes out. Many and great are the divergences between eternal life as they will know it and as Christians are to know it; this cannot be gainsaid. Hence to speak of new birth and eternal life as mere phrases always intended to convey the same thing is very misleading.

Further, the more we examine the Word of God, the more we are led to see and understand that new birth is the sovereign act of God in the history of a soul, sovereign as the wind which comes we know not whence, and goes we know not whither. Some sovereign communication from God is applied by the Holy Ghost in sovereign power, and the subject finds himself possessed of new-born interest he knows not how nor why. He finds sin distasteful where it was tasty before. He discovers a strange drawing after God and a longing for holiness hitherto unknown. He finds a new instinct for prayer, and inquiry after truth, unaccountably real. He may not be able to analyse for himself the aspirations and affections begotten in his soul. He may as yet know nothing of redemption, or justification, or forgiveness of his sins. But the instincts of a new life are asserting themselves, the product of this sovereign act of God. These desires, these movements, can find their only solution in Christ; but as yet it is possible he knows little or nothing of Christ. Like Old Testament believers who in places are seen with cravings and longings unfulfilled, our new-born soul may not yet have met with Christ, in whom every question is answered and every fear removed. He is as yet the seeker, and his seeking — bound as it is to be answered by the grace of God — is not yet ended in rest in Christ.

But in the same Word of God we discover that the known possession of eternal life is the accompaniment of *receiving testimony* as to Christ. New birth is God's sovereign act, and nowhere does Scripture say, He that believeth shall be born again. To say this would be to take the new birth out of the place in which God has set it, and to make faith in the Gospel antecedent to the new birth. The new birth is an operation in which God is first; for no one can be a co-operator in his own birth. The old Adam does not produce faith, or else those that are in the flesh could please God. It is when sovereign power has broken into our dark night and implanted a new principle of being never there before, that our awakenings and longings, our grief over sin, our breathings after God, can be met, and met only, in Christ. Hence in John 3, where this subject is treated, the Lord Himself when speaking of new birth speaks not of faith. It is only when He presents Himself as lifted up, the Subject of testimony, that He speaks of faith in Himself and eternal life. Nothing of this was presented in the Old Testament as a present blessing. For the Old Testament saint, born again as he undoubtedly was, eternal life was only a promise, and a promise connected with blessing on earth. This blessing, and even the full forgiveness of sins, was to be connected with the fulfilment of the promise of the Messiah. The fear of death was still there, no one was in a position at that time to say that he had eternal life. It is the coming of Christ that has brought life and incorruptibility to light through the Gospel.

It is in the Gospel of John that the present possession of eternal life is so much referred to. And Christ's rejection on earth being anticipatively considered from the very first chapter, eternal life is presented as being secured for God and for the believer in the person of the Son. Hence the oft-repeated statement, "He that believeth . . . hath everlasting life;" and, "He that seeth the Son and believeth upon Him hath everlasting life." The Son was here as the gift of God's love, and in order that the purpose of God for man might be brought to pass. But in order that the love of God might be fully revealed and the whole sentence of death on the first and guilty order of man be carried out and thus annulled for men, He laid down His life as Man after the flesh; then rose again after a new order to which death can never attach, in which He can share with His brethren both His position as a Man before God, and as a Son with His Father (John 20). Let it be remembered that according to the Gospel itself, its own testimony, "these are written that ye may believe that JESUS is the Christ, the Son of God, and, that believing ye may have life in His name." The possession of life (and the known possession of it) flows from faith in testimony.

We may often see signs of new birth, and in our minds be confident that the person or persons are subjects of the working of the grace of God; but neither we nor they could rightly assert that they have eternal life apart from definite faith in the Son.

But the rejection of Christ, and our peculiar lot as believers upon Him in the time of His rejection, gives *for us* a remarkable and unique character to life, eternal life. Actually we are associated with Him *where He is*, and the Spirit is given from Him as ascended to the Father, in order to lead Christians into the joy of present knowledge of the Father; severing us from the world, delivering us from sin, and the power of the devil, in order that we may take up the privilege of present communion with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. This is unfolded in John's epistle. Moreover, where eternal life is possessed, there are certain features delineated in the epistle by which it may be known. Possessors of eternal life keep His commandments (1 John 2: 3-4), they love their brother (verses 9-11), they practise righteousness (verse 29). Obedience, love, righteousness are evidences on the subjective side of the possession of eternal life. If these things be not there, no credit can be given to a man's profession of possessing eternal life. We do not see the heart certainly; we can only see the life. But inasmuch as these are accompaniments of the life, we cannot be assured of the life if we see not the accompaniments. "These things have I written unto you that believe on the Name of the Son of God that ye may know that ye have eternal life."

Eternal life is, however, not only a life which yields certain evident features among men. It is a life which has its own sphere of enjoyments and relationships; and for us has its home — not in Zion, nor in national or social pleasures on earth, but — in the scenes where JESUS now is, and in the nearness of a known and loved relationship with the Father. It, therefore, accepts separation from the world as deliverance from a scene wholly contrary to both Father and Son, and finds more pleasure in Their society than in the midst of earth's fairest attractions or delights. It is "*eternal life* in order that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent."

In our case, then, new birth is followed by faith in Christ and the knowledge of eternal life is ours in the Son — not in Adam; it is evidenced by obedience, love, and righteousness down here on earth, along with deliverance from the world and sin (or lawlessness); it finds its home above where the Son as Man has gone; it cultivates heavenly affections and intercourse, and discovers by the Spirit given to us, quite a new world of blessing outside of what is visible to the natural man, most wondrously attractive because we are even now made conversant with God's purposes as to Christ, all to be fulfilled in the age to come.

In the case of the Old Testament believers, new birth was followed by faith in the one True God, and promises as to earthly blessing and eternal life in its earthly form. They knew not the plenary and eternal forgiveness of sins, they had not access to the Father of glory in the manner we have, they knew not the full love of God now revealed by the subsequent coming of the Son.

In the case of millennial saints, new birth will be followed by faith in God, and in Jesus as Messiah; they will see Him revealed in glory and will believe on Him because they see Him. They will enjoy His Kingdom rule, and the blessings of earth which His Kingdom will bring in. Enemies on earth will be subdued; peace and plenty will be enjoyed; righteousness, peace, and joy which are always the result of the establishment of the Kingdom of God (and which are *now* ours by the Holy Ghost) will be the blessed atmosphere around them in the world, as well as the internal product by God's work in their own hearts. Yet even there and then they will not have the access to God which we have; priests and Levites will again represent them as of old in Temple service. Outward inducements to evil will be absent; Satan will be bound; and what was in a measure true in Solomon's day, "neither adversary nor evil occurrent," will be much more truly said of the millennial reign of our Lord.

So that while in every case new birth is a necessity, the eternal life which will be, or is, enjoyed varies in its character and form according to the dispensation in which the believer is found — Old Testament, Church dispensation (of Christ's rejection), or millennium. Hence it seems of great importance for us to distinguish in our minds between that new birth, which is the beginning of all God's work in the redemption circles, and the various forms of eternal life into which the subjects of the new birth in the various dispensations are to be introduced.

Eternal life for the Old Testament believers, and eternal life for the millennial saints, is to be distinguished and to be most urgently distinguished from eternal life in its present features for the Christian. It has been truly remarked that there will not be two Adams in heaven. All who are blessed on the ground of redemption will have life in Christ, and in Christ the last Adam alone; yet the earthly blessing which will constitute eternal life for earthly saints is one thing; and the heavenly blessing which will constitute eternal life for us is another. We must distinguish things that differ.

I hope this will help you.